

## “Hard to Take”

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Continuing a series on the Gospel of John

John 6.35,38,41-71

March 20, 2016

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In a moment, [reader] will bring us today’s Scripture. It’s rather long, so she and I are going to go back and forth.

First, though, here is the scene. We had an enormous crowd. They were hungry. Jesus started with a ridiculously inadequate amount of bread. With that alone he fed them an abundance that exceeded their appetites. Doing this, he drew from their memory that time when God fed God’s People, their ancestors, in the wilderness after freeing them from slavery. That bread-like “manna” had given life to that generation until it passed away. Remember that.

Second, what [reader] will read is all about life. Eternal life. Deep lasting life. Life in the age to come.<sup>1</sup> Immediately, I think “going to heaven,” but it’s much bigger. It is about all of Life restored by God to its fullness and depth. It’s about Life renewed by God to be finally complete, whole, and flourishing. It’s the life God gives us to live. It makes what we now think of as “living” seem a cheap imitation. Yes, this new Life will not end. But also, this new Life can begin now! Remember that.

If this sounds great — and I hope it does — also realize that this promise of Life is hard to take.

### II

Jesus said, *“I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever trusts in me will never be thirsty. . . . I have come down from heaven not to do my will, but the will of him who sent me. . . .”*

The Jewish crowd grumbled about him because he said, “I am the bread that came down from heaven.” They asked, *“Isn’t this Jesus, Joseph’s son, whose mother and father we know? How can he now say, ‘I have come down from heaven?’”*

John 6.35,38,41-42. Adapted from the Common English Bible

Starting here, and as we continue, Jesus will teach us about Life’s source, Life’s choice, and Life’s cost.

First, Life’s source.

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<sup>1</sup> Often the Greek phrase *zāō eis ton aiōn* is translated as “live forever.” However, it literally means “live into the age,” with the “age” referring to the coming messianic kingdom.

Put yourself in this crowd. *Did Jesus just say he came from heaven? I thought so. Strange. Because my brothers' sister-in-law's cousin insists he grew up in Nazareth, just over those hills. Yah, that place. Yah, that Jesus, Mary and Joe's boy. What's this "comes from heaven" stuff?*

Again and again, Jesus talks about himself this way. His origin is heaven. Think of it, not as a different place, but a different reality. In our cosmos-reality where we dwell, God is fully present, but mostly hidden and, caught only in glimpses. Heaven is the divine reality, where the presence of God is fully known.

Jesus says, *"That's where I'm from!"* Wow!

We've heard this before. At the beginning of John's Gospel, his account of Jesus, he showed his hand. Jesus is the Word of God, the Presence of God, God become flesh and blood. That claim should always shock and perplex us. Jesus is the Creator-Son, delighting to come on a mission from his Father into God's beloved and broken world, to give Life.

Life — this deep, lasting, full Life — has one source: God in Jesus.

Do you find that hard to take?

### III

*Jesus responded, "Don't grumble among yourselves. No one can come to me unless they are drawn to me by the Father who sent me, and I will raise them up at the last day. It is written in the Prophets, 'And they will all be taught by God.' Everyone who has listened to the Father and learned from him comes to me. No one has seen the Father except the one who is from God. He has seen the Father. I assure you, whoever trusts has deep, lasting life. I am the bread of life. Your ancestors ate manna in the wilderness and they died. This is the bread that comes down from heaven so that whoever eats from it will never die. I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats this bread will live into the coming age . . .*

John 6.43-51a

Life's source is God in Jesus. Now, Life's choice.

Can you share in this deep, lasting, Jesus-Life?

It all depends . . . on God. God draws us to Jesus. We do not bring ourselves. Without God, we are not coming close.

Does that seem right? Can I accept that it is not up to me? That I cannot achieve this Life, I cannot earn this Life? I can claim as much credit for it as a baby can for being born. It's

not up to me.

If it is up to God, then don't you think God should have some standards, set some minimum qualifications. You know how people are! Might God bring anybody to this Jesus-Life? Anyone. Are you okay with that? Really?

Don't waste too much time thinking. It does not matter whether we're okay with it or not. God simply does what God does. God draws people to Jesus, to Life.

Does God draw everyone? I don't know. It's not up to me.

Does God draw only those who want to be drawn? That would seem polite, but maybe not. C. S. Lewis was being interviewed. The reporter kept pushing him to talk about his decision for Christ. Lewis refused to put it that way. Instead, God had closed in on him and he could not escape (though at the time he badly wanted to). Instead of deciding, he said, "*I was decided upon.*"<sup>2</sup>

Life's source is God-in-Jesus. The choice for Life, for each person to have Life, is God's. Only God can draw us to Jesus. God gets to decide.

Are you okay with that? Or, is that hard to take?

#### IV

*. . . the bread that I will give for the life of the cosmos is my flesh."*

Then the Jewish crowd debated among themselves, asking, "*How can this man give us his flesh to eat?*"

Jesus said to them, "*I assure you, unless you eat the flesh of the Human One and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Whoever chews my flesh and drinks my blood has deep, lasting life, and I will raise them up at the last day. My flesh is true food and my blood is true drink. Whoever chews my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me and I in them. As the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever chews me lives because of me. This is the bread that came down from heaven. It isn't like the bread your ancestors ate, and then they died. Whoever chews this bread will live into the coming age.*"

Jesus said these things while he was teaching in the synagogue in Capernaum. Many of his disciples who heard this said, "*This message is harsh. Who can hear it?*"

John 6.51-60

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<sup>2</sup> N. T. Wright, John for Everyone, Part 1 (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2004), 82.

Uh . . . yah . . . harsh . . . hard to take.

The Source of Life is God. The Choice for Life is God's. Finally, the Cost of Life is God's. Though, what Jesus says here seems entirely un-God-like.

Jesus doesn't even have the decency to say "body." Bodies can be strong and beautiful. God made us as bodies. But Jesus says flesh. It feels weak. Gross, like ground up meat. Leftovers on a battlefield.

*Excuse me, Jesus? Eat your flesh! Drink your blood! . . . Sweet mercy."*

He pours it on.<sup>3</sup> He uses a word that means chomping, gobbling, feasting like an animal devouring its prey.<sup>4</sup> *"Chew my flesh. Drink my blood."*

There is nothing sublime, pious, not even religious about it. Yes, it points to the Lord's Supper, our Holy Communion. Bread, the body of Christ. Wine, the blood of Christ. But the Lord's Supper and what Jesus says here are both pointing to the same ugly thing. His death.

Not a great, noble death. Not a heroic martyrdom. Not a saintly last sigh, surrounded by his disciples. Not great, but mean, in the gutter. Not noble, but shameful. Not a hero; no one was cheering, they were jeering, taunting, mocking. Disciples attending him? No! Most had fled. No peaceful parting, but an agonized, broken cry. Then, dead.

I'll spare the details. Crucifixion was gross, by design. Like eating flesh and drinking blood. Disgusting. Horrifying. So deeply shameful.

If we don't flinch at this . . . so hard to take.

Jesus knew that the disciples were grumbling about this and he said to them, *"Does this offend you? What if you were to see the Human One going up where he was before? The Spirit is the one who gives life and human ability doesn't help at all. The words I have spoken to you are spirit and life. Yet some of you don't trust."* Jesus knew from the beginning who wouldn't trust and the one who would betray him. He said, *"For this reason I said to you that none can come to me unless the Father enables them to do so."*

At this, many of his disciples turned away and no longer walked with him.

John 6.61-66

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<sup>3</sup> Frederick Dale Bruner, The Gospel of John, A Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 433.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 434.

It's a strange thing. Jesus describes his ascension to his Father, and before that, his resurrection from death's power, and before that, his death on a cross . . . he describes them all together as his "being lifted up." Through these three acts of the drama, he returns to that heavenly-God-reality he came from. These three acts. Not just his ascension, not just his resurrection . . . those are immensely strange, yet seem to fit. Also, his crucifixion! Somehow on his cross, his disgusting, flesh and blood cross, the God-reality bursts through. Somehow, in his death, Life bursts through.

And we're to draw close to this. Close enough to chew it. Close enough to drink it. Jesus somehow gets into us. Not "super-Jesus." Shamed and broken, betrayed and condemned Jesus.

And by this Jesus, we live.

Dare you get that close? Dare I?

Only as God draws us.

V

Many turned away. They'd had enough. They couldn't take any more. They stopped following?

God draws us. Can we say "No?" I don't know.

Jesus turns to whoever is left. Maybe twelve of them.<sup>5</sup>

He asks, "*You don't want to leave, do you?*"

One, Peter, says, "*Master, where else can we go? You have the words of deep, lasting life.*" Peter doesn't say, "*We get what you're saying.*" Or, "*This is easy.*" It's hard to take. Jesus is hard to take.

He says, "*We trust you.*" That's what it boils down to. Trust. Not "figuring Jesus all out." Trust. "Not being comfortable with Jesus." Trust.

He says, "*We trust you. We know that you are God's holy one.*"

May God draw us ever closer, so to share in Jesus. Even his flesh and blood. Amen.

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<sup>5</sup> John 6.67-71.